When she had read the letter, Luella gave a gasp. "Half a million pounds!" she said. "How could you be expected to pay that?"

"Quite easily," the Duke replied, "if I am to avoid a scandal and have no wish to accept an Italian as my son."

"But if, as you say, you were not married, how can they prove that he is yours?" Luella enquired.

The Duke held out to her another document he had in his hand. As she took it from him she saw that it was a marriage certificate. It was signed by Tia Broletto and Ivor Stone. "So . . you *were* . . married!" she stammered.

"That is a fake," the Duke said. "I admit my signature has been cleverly copied, so I imagine that Tia must have kept a letter of mine. I remember writing to her after I left Italy."

"A fake!" Luella exclaimed. "How is it . . possible they could . . do such a . . thing?"

"Vecchio will do anything that will make him money," the Duke said scornfully. "You cannot have been in Milan very long if you have not heard of him. He is the owner of several disreputable houses, including one which is patronised by many important people and where the girls, I admit, are particularly pretty and carefully chosen!"

He spoke in a sharp, cold voice and Luella asked somewhat tentatively: "Is . . is that . . where you . . met Tia?"

"I was on a mission," the Duke explained, "with an extremely boring general and it was a relief to get away from the official conferences and dinner-parties.

I went to what I suppose you could call the 'red light district' to seek amusement."

Because she understood what he was saying Luella blushed. She also turned her face away as if she did not want to ask any more questions.

However, as if he wished her to know the truth, the Duke went on: "Tia was very attractive and I imagine about the same age as yourself. I was in Milan for a week and saw her every evening when I was off duty."

He paused and went on, his voice sharpening: "There was no question of there being anything permanent in our relationship. She had been well-trained by Vecchio in knowing how to make a man enjoy himself without any thought of responsibilities."

Luella did not say anything and the Duke continued: "Even in Italy, where it is accepted that such men have a place in the night life of a city, Vecchio is considered an evil influence."

"I . . I thought there . . was something . . wrong about him," Luella said, "but . . I did not know . . what it . . was."

"And yet you trusted him."

"He seemed surprised that I was alone when I was looking at the Cathedral and offered to escort me back to the hotel where I had been staying with my father."

"You are fortunate that he did not take you to one of his 'mansions' and drug you," the Duke said. "After that, I am told, there is no escape."

Luella gave a little cry. "So that is . . what he . . intended! I realise now why when he offered me